

A Rolex and Oscar Wilde

Irish Inspiration

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Figure 1. The completed 'Irish green' dial.



Figure 2. Original design concept for engraving the rear of the case.



Figure 3. The completed engraving with five-leaf clover. Note: The red line is commonly used on protective film.

I recently finished a project that I had in my mind for some time and which had taken over ten months due to the lockdown and all the associated restrictions. This was a rather well-worn and damaged 1970s Rolex model 1601 which I had bought. It needed a full service plus a new crown and a polish plus replacement of the non-original gem-set dial.

I decided to give this watch its own character, in addition to restoring it to its original mechanical condition, by personalising the dial and engraving the case back with a unique pattern, **Figures 1–3**. This included the famous saying from Oscar Wilde: 'Time is a waste of money'. As readers will know, Wilde was a world-famous Irish poet, playwright and writer, known for his wit. He actually spoke my native tongue, Greek, as well, which I had never known before.

As bought, the watch was fitted with an awful, completely fake dial, badly set with moissanite stones, **Figure 4**. I purchased a separate, period-correct original Rolex 'pie-pan dial' (where the edge of the dial is bevelled down), although this was also somewhat tired, **Figure 5**. I decided to have this re-finished in a beautiful green. This matches the five-leaf clover that I had hand-engraved on the back of



Figure 4. The original watch showing the non-authentic Rolex dial.



Figure 5. The replacement 'pie-pan' dial.

the watch. The reason for the five-leaf clover is its association with good luck (the fifth leaf represents financial gain and fits nicely with the Wilde statement) which I think we all need as a result of this awful pandemic! Despite that, though, my thoughts on this watch were actually finalised before covid.

I appreciate that some watch enthusiasts may have an issue with the original dial being customised in green. However, considering that the dial that was fitted to the watch when I bought it was fake, and the only replacement I could find was damaged, I judged that this was an acceptable outcome.

Additionally, as Oscar Wilde was Irish, it seemed fitting to use the official colour of his homeland.

The movement was in need of a lot of 'TLC'. After completely servicing the movement, I supplied and fitted hands as well as a tube and crown, all genuine Rolex.

Regarding the movement, I would say that it's important to change the barrel bridge bush if worn, and also the centre wheel bush, **Figure 6**. **Figure 7** shows fitting an arbor bushing for the barrel in the barrel bridge. I always find it a good idea to use an original brand new Rolex 1520 mainspring as



Figure 6. Barrel bush.



Figure 7. Fitting the arbor bushing.

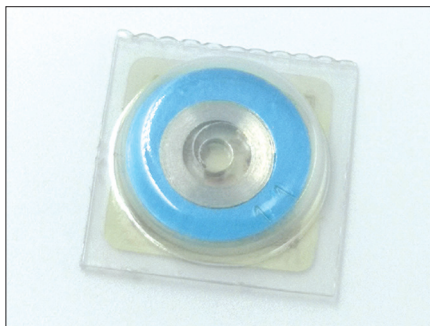


Figure 8. Rolex 1520 mainspring.

it is stronger, which really helps with the amplitude and overall timekeeping, **Figure 8**. In fact, it is the strongest automatic mainspring in the 15-calibre series and therefore does well with the amplitude half wound (minimum amplitude approximately 200 degrees in the hanging positions) and no more than 280–290 degrees fully wound dial up or dial down. Fully wound, it is expected to reach 230–250 in the hanging positions. I would say that many watchmakers seem to concentrate on the amplitude, but the rate is just as important: both half-wound and fully wound. Understandably, for older Rolex calibres such as the 15xx, you do want the most performance out of the movement due to age. However, once the first clean of the movement is completed after taking off the dial and hands plus the calendar ring and



Figure 9. The reconditioned bracelet.

the three screws for lifting the complete automatic mechanism off, it is then possible to check the balance and pallet endshakes, as well as the shake at each train wheel plus the barrel endshake and shake at the barrel bridge. I would also check the escapement including horn- and guard-pin shakes. Also check for wear to the pallet fork. It is always good to make sure the curb pins are correct too.

I do usually see the barrel bush that needs replacing (as shown in this example) which does wear rather easily. I would also like to mention how the steel used to make the train wheels/pallet pivots on the 15 calibres are much more resistant to scoring/wear than on, say, the 3135/225 movements. From my research, older calibres had the pivots burnished, whereas in the newer calibres the pivots are chemically hardened. The steel in the older calibres is often reported as being more durable. I would say as long as a watch is serviced and sealed correctly, the pivots will be free from any sort of wear or oxidation.

Once all pivots have been checked along with a check for wear inside the barrel, I would then fully strip down the movement, including all keyless work and end stones, then sharpen some peg wood and clean all jewels by hand.

Once all above is done then the watch is cleaned a second time using clean fluids. When this is completed, the final service can begin.

As you probably already know, the crystals on vintage Rolex watches are made of acrylic. Sometimes these are known by trade names such as Plexiglas or Heselite. The difference between these older-style crystals (used by Rolex until the late 1980s) and the current sapphire crystals is quite obvious because the sapphire feels cold to the touch, being a much better thermal conductor than acrylic. Acrylic is flexible, allowing it some range in rendering a watch waterproof. One has to be careful because it can

become opaque or otherwise damaged by solvents such as acetone.

I fully valeted the case and bracelet, **Figure 9**, including the fluted bezel which was beautifully restored to bring back its sharpness. The watch was also pressure-tested to over 100 metres.

Why Oscar Wilde?

One weekend, while out with my family, I saw a beautiful Irish/British green Porsche drive past. It gave me a lightbulb moment. I decided to refinish the original dial to green. This also connected me to my living and working in Liverpool, which has huge Irish connections. Today, up to 50% of Liverpool's population is believed to have Irish ancestry.

I knew full well that re-finishing an original Rolex dial to a custom colour may raise eyebrows in the very critical watch industry. However it's my watch and I chose to do this to show my passion for what can be done with a timepiece. It's all about your love, drive and enthusiasm for what you do! In the end, I put in writing that the dial is refinished, albeit an original part, and the watch sold to an Irish dealer – in under ten minutes!

Interestingly, Rolex itself introduced a similar colour in its new range of coloured dials for the Oyster Perpetual series not long after I modified this watch!

The Irish have had a huge influence in the world of watchmaking and are known for their excellence in this field. I would like to mention how I was lucky enough to be taught by John Murphy FBHI on my WOSTEP course, which also included me also working with Leo Sweeney at JLC (Richemont), who is an amazing watchmaker. I really enjoyed my work experience at JLC when it was at Canary Wharf. It was an experience I shall never forget: the workshop was outstanding and the watchmakers were incredible.

There are also Irish connections at the Rolex UK training department. Furthermore, who can ignore the McGonigle brothers? Stephen and John McGonigle founded the Irish Swiss Institute of Horology in Dublin in 1996. They won the 2018 Temporis Awards, with John inducted into the Temporis Hall of Fame. Personally, I would say that is an amazing achievement for the McGonigles and their homeland. The watches they have produced are true art, in my opinion.